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WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ROUSSEAU'S THEORY OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

What did Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) discuss about women, children and the relationship between them? What suggestions can we draw today from his discussions? These questions are too broad for us to discuss briefly, but this paper is an attempt to consider them focusing the dilemma around women and children. To discuss Rousseau's views whether on women or on children will require a comprehensive analysis of his essays, novels, autobiography and everything that contains reference to these subjects.⁽¹⁾ Noting that, for the purpose of this paper we will limit the scope of our analysis to *Emile, or on Education* (*Émile ou de l'éducation*, 1762).⁽²⁾

1. Evaluations of Rousseau and *Émile*

Rousseau is often said to have "discovered the child," in the sense that our view of the child in the modern age originated from his view of the child represented in *Émile*. In short, he delivered a strong message that a child should not be seen as an immature adult but there is a unique, irreplaceable value in a child (or childhood). He discussed methods of education to guide a child's development according to the nature (human nature) without harming it. On the supposition that he has every requirement for a good teacher, he guides his fictitious student *Émile* from his birth to independence in a five-book story. *Émile* is a boy, but the story from Books 1 to 3, dealing with education of children under 15, discusses children in general. From Book 4 onward or after puberty, Rousseau apparently presupposes sexual difference and in Book 5, he proceeds to present his ideas about women and their education with the appearance of *Émile*'s future wife Sophie.

Émile has attracted innumerable readers since its publication until today as the classic of modern educational thoughts. For instance, some Japanese books on the Convention on the Rights of the Child cite it in explaining the spirit of the convention.⁽³⁾ However, it has also been the subject of questions and criticisms. Out of all, one question we cannot overlook today is how Rousseau's ideas about women and their education are related with the ideology of motherhood (i.e., the idea that the essence of womanhood rests in becoming a mother, requiring every woman to live for that).⁽⁴⁾ As early as in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) strongly criticized Rousseau's theory of education as enslaving women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).⁽⁵⁾

This means that Rousseau opened the way for the respect for children's rights but at the same time opened the way for the suppression of the rights of women. If so, does his theory of

education embody exactly the dilemma in the relationship between children and women?

2. The discovery of childhood and the duties of a woman

To start with, let us examine the relation between Rousseau's discovery of the childhood and his discussions around women from what he says in the beginning part of *Émile* (the preface and the first pages of Book 1). Rousseau begins his preface by mentioning that he wrote the story to "gratify a good mother"⁽⁶⁾. Then he adds a long footnote to the paragraph appealing to mothers to protect and love their children, to explain the relation between the education of a child and a mother. In the sequence he uses, his points here may be summarized as follows.⁽⁷⁾

- 1) The first education is most important and the job belongs incontestably to women, for nature has not given men milk to nourish the child.
- 2) Women are able to watch over the children more closely than men and can influence them more. The success of their education concerns them more nearly, for most widows are at the mercy of their children, who make them vividly feel the good and bad effects of their education.
- 3) The laws give too little authority to mothers, but their position is more certain than that of fathers and their duties are more painful. Their cares are more important to the peace within the family.
- 4) Generally, mothers feel more attachment to the children. It is wrong if mothers spoil them, but ambition, avarice, tyranny and neglect of fathers are more harmful to the children.

First, he declares that the first education of a child, i.e. the education during the first six or seven years from birth belongs to women, on the ground that the author of nature left the job of childbirth and breast-feeding to women (1). In relation to this, he also criticized the practice of putting children at nurse then so prevalent in France as to be described as "Our first teacher is our nurse"⁽⁸⁾. The primary duty of a mother is to bring up her child by herself because "the child need a mother's care as much as her milk"⁽⁹⁾. No one can expect a mother's love from a hired nurse even if she can take physical care of the child.

According to Rousseau, women feel more attachment to their children, care for them more and can influence them more than men, and the success of their education concerns them more (2 and 4). Given such a relationship between the mother and the child, "The child should love his mother before he knows that he should"⁽¹⁰⁾. No child is allowed to lack respect for the mother, who bore him in her womb and nursed him at her breast, who for so many years devoted herself to his care, he continues. The child and the mother are bound with each other by reciprocal duties and affection based on their biological or physical ties.

Then he proceeds to discuss the duties of a woman not only in her relationship with the child but within the whole family life (3). He says, "If you wish to restore all men to their primary duties, begin with the mothers"⁽¹¹⁾. "Once women become mothers again, men will become husbands and fathers"⁽¹²⁾. However, when mothers are willing to bring up their own

children, natural feeling will revive in every heart, the domestic life will be attractive, and conjugal bonds will be tightened. Then morals will reform themselves and the state will be more populated. Thus, women fulfilling their duties as mothers are even considered to be the key to resolving problems for morals and the nation.

Rousseau wrote *Émile* in the first place to consider "the art of training men"⁽¹³⁾ for a moral reform and the construction of an ideal society. As we have seen, the new idea of childhood he advanced to begin this process was backed by the proposition on the duties of women as mothers. The duties of a mother are painful, but their accomplishment will bring her "delight"⁽¹⁴⁾ from the child. In Rousseau's theory of education, the relationship between women and children was reciprocal and harmonious.

3. Rousseau's view of women: his intention and its consequence

Next, let us examine Rousseau's discussion on women in Book 5. He stressed "the vanity of the disputes concerning preferences or the equality of the sexes." In every aspect that does not relate to sex, the two sexes are equal: in every aspect that relates to sex, they are different and not comparable. For, each sex pursues "the path marked out for it by nature" for its "special purpose"⁽¹⁵⁾. Woman is worth much as a woman, and as long as she makes a good use of the rights unique to woman, she has the advantage. However, when she tries to usurp men's rights, she stays beneath men. This argument seems to indicate that Rousseau did not aim to despise or discriminate against women, at least intentionally. Nevertheless, he proceeds to argue as follows.

According to Rousseau, in the union of the sexes, each alike contributes to the common end. But they do not do it in the same way. From this diversity springs the first difference in the psychological relations between the two. In his words, "The one should be active and strong, the other passive and weak. It is necessary that the one have the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance." By this "law of nature," he concludes, woman is made to please man and to be subjected and therefore "ought to make herself pleasing to man"⁽¹⁶⁾.

This argument by Rousseau has long been criticized as enslaving women, which I pointed out at the outset. The criticism is obviously right, but he also says "the stronger is the master in all appearance and yet in effect depends on the weaker". This means that the law of nature, "by giving the woman more of a facility to excite desires than man has to satisfy them, makes him dependent on her whether she likes it or not"⁽¹⁷⁾. Rousseau thought that woman did not only subject herself to man but the two sexes were mutually dependent.

To repeat in other words, Rousseau did not intend to subordinate women to men. He said, "nature means them (women) to think, to judge, to love, to know things, to cultivate their minds as well as their persons" but did not tell men to make servants of their partners. For that purpose, he thinks women should learn many things, but "only such things as are suitable"⁽¹⁸⁾. Although we will not examine here the specific subjects he discussed for education of women, they are essentially defined by the purpose of the sex. Then what is the purpose of woman?

According to Rousseau, their proper aim is to have children.⁽¹⁹⁾ In arguing this, expecting the refutation that women do not always have children, he does not fail to add that even if women living licentiously in large cities have few children, such exceptions can not negate general laws. At all events, "a woman's role" is "to be a mother" and "general laws of nature and morality make provision for this state of things".⁽²⁰⁾ It is worth noting for the part of women that the ability to have children is discussed here not in discussing differences between the sexes but as the essence of womanhood rooted in human nature and customs. Needless to mention, this sort of argument may work to oppress women who do not wish to or can not have children.

Conclusion

Rousseau's view was consistent throughout *Émile*, in discussing both the special purpose of woman in Book 5 and the duties of a mother in the beginning part, where he is said to have discovered the childhood. The essential nature of a woman is to have children, and that leads to her accomplishment of the duties of a mother to bring her "delight." Apparently, he did not anticipate that his argument would trouble women against his intention: he does not seem to have keenly recognized the dilemma around women and children. Of course, the purpose of this paper is not to criticize him for his lacking this perception. What we need to draw from Rousseau's discussion on education is the question of how the modern view of the child is structurally linked with discrimination against women. It is meaningless to try to separate the two, accepting the former as universal while attributing the latter to the historical context of his time and his person.

Notes

- (1) For Rousseau's views on women and on education of women, see Gilbert Py, *Rousseau et les éducateurs, Étude sur la fortune des idées pédagogiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau en France et en Europe au XVIIIe siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), esp. pp.338-405. For Rousseau's views on children, see Julia Simon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Children, in : Susan M. Turner and Gareth B. Matthews, ed., *The Philosopher's Child, Critical Essays in the Western Tradition* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998), pp.105-120. For a well-developed discussion on these subjects in Japan, see Nobuko Morita, *Kodomo no jidai* (The age of children; on the paradox in Rousseau's *Émile*) (Tokyo: Shinyou sha, 1986).
- (2) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, in his *Œuvres complètes IV*, ed., by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Subsequent references are to this edition. For the English translation of the text by Rousseau, I relied on the translation by Barbara Foxley revised by Grace Roosevelt which is published at the website of the Institute for Learning Technologies, Teacher's College of Columbia (<http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/Projects/emile/emile.html>) as part of its digital Content Project. Foxley's original translation was published as a part of the Everyman's Library collection by J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd (London) and E. P. Dutton and Co. (New York) in 1911.
- (3) See Hiroshi Fukuda, *Jidou no kenri juyaku madeno 30 nen* (Thirty years for the Convention

- on the Rights of the Child), in : Tetsuo Simomura, ed., *Jidou no kenri jouyaku* (The Convention on the Rights of the Child) (Tokyo: Jijitsuushin sha, 1994), p.120 ; Akira Nakano and Takeshi Ogasa, *Kodomo no kenri jouyaku* (Handbook of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996), p.20.
- (4) Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet, ed., *Histoire des mères — du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris: Editions Montabla, 1977), trans. by Satoko Nakajima et al. *Hahaoya no shakaishi* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobou, 1994).
- (5) For Wollstonecraft's critique to Rousseau, see Tamae Mizuta, *Josei kaihou shisoushi* (History of thoughts on women's liberation) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobou, 1979).
- (6) Rousseau, *Émile*, p.241.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp.245-246.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.252.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p.257.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p.259.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p.257.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.258.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p.241.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p.246.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.693.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p.693.
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp.695-696.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p.702.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p.698.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p.699.